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PC guy

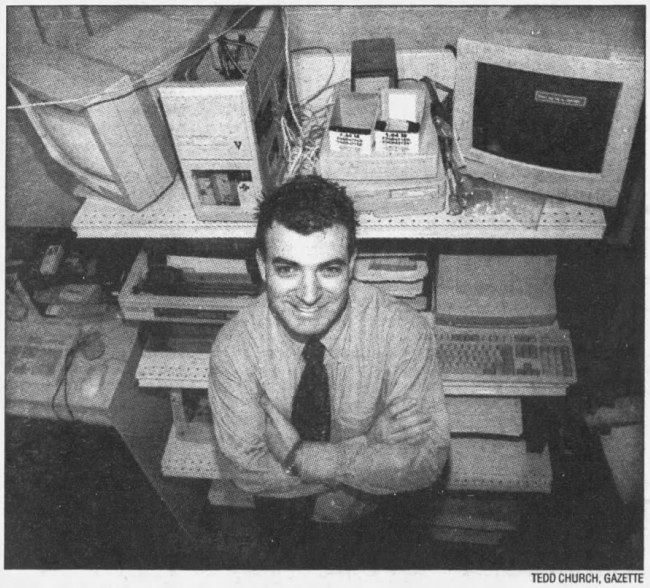
At 17, he was a CEGEP dropout. At 24, he's Quebec's Young Entrepreneur of the Year and on his way to becoming a millionaire

JAN RAVENSBERGEN
THE GAZETTE

WHEN IT COMES TO REALLY KNOWING the electronic guts of a personal computer, "there's not much in there that holds any secrets from me," Benoit Laliberté mused last week.

That – and a reluctant admission that "I'm the kind of guy who's really afraid of missing the boat" – is about as introspective as the intense entrepreneur ever appears to get, even as he relaxes during a far-ranging interview in his spartan offices at Jitec Corp. Inc. in St. Hubert.

Age 24, this whiz kid certainly doesn't appear to have missed much in the way of business boats. A decade ago, he was already selling software to strangers. He's since earned his spurs several times over. And he's just been named Young Entrepreneur of the Year for Quebec by the Business Development Bank of Canada.



Benoit Laliberté started his computer career at age 10, when he got a Radio Shack portable, the TRS-80.

TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

Not bad for a fellow who dropped out of CEGEP at 17, abandoning a year of studies in pure and applied science to follow the insistent lure of the microchip.

Laliberté is sole owner of Jitec, which operates two corporate-owned computer stores and four franchise outlets around Montreal. Three of franchises are run by ex-employees of Jitec, who are equipped with entrepreneurial urges of their own but are reluctant to leave Laliberté's orbit.

The stores retail Laliberté's homegrown Vectoria variety of IBM-clone PCs, each of which features a price tag as much as 40-per-cent below comparable machines from big-name manufacturers. Jitec, Laliberté boasted, can supply the full computer, software, networking and system-maintenance needs of small firms in the 50-employee range "from A to Z."

A big catch to date has been Les Parfumeries dans un Jardin, a retail chain based in Boucherville with 75 outlets, 60 of them in the province.

"Their after-sales service is impeccable; for that, I've never seen anything like Jitec," said Michel Brousseau, vice-president (development) at Info-Gestion Management Inc., which handles the computer needs of Les Parfumeries.

"That's the major reason we've been with them for the past two years," Brousseau added, both for Vectoria's work station based on the Pentium chip, and a dual-processor file server, which uses two more-powerful Pentium Pro chips.

"With Benoit," Brousseau added, "I've had no major problems." Minor problems? "Perhaps. Like with no matter what other company."

Other Jitec clients include CEGEP Marie-Victorin and Vanguard private school, as well as a variety of government departments.

Jitec has sales outlets in St. Hubert, Laval, Montreal, Beloeil, Saint-Hyacinthe and Sainte-Julie. Over-all, the operation will rack up about $7 million of revenue for the year to end next June 30, Laliberté forecast, up from $5.1 million last year, and $3.5 million and $2 million for the prior two years. Including staff in the franchised stores, Jitec employs 40 people.

As for profits, Laliberté was less than forthright, suggesting only that earnings during the current year will exceed several hundred thousand dollars. A public share offering is possible within the next two years, he suggested.

From a technical standpoint, Laliberté's point of pride is his eVac, for Electronic Virus Activity Control. It's an innovative, hardware-based virus-detection system he developed for PCs.

And it appears to be headed for technological oblivion.

Laliberté's claim in 1994 that eVac was outright "infallible" and simply wouldn't let computer viruses spread got a cynic's reception. Later that year, though, eVac received a positive review from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The Mounties' security evaluation and inspection team judged eVac to be "an effective way of preventing (computer) viruses from spreading or damaging data."

Bill Gates and Microsoft Corp. quickly spoiled that coup. Memory management on both the Windows 95 and the Windows NT operating systems is incompatible with eVac, even though the approach works just fine for Windows 3.11. So rather than risk as much as $250,000 to re-engineer eVac, Laliberté has shelved it – temporarily, he insists. At Info-Gestion, Brousseau, 42, and a former industry whiz kid himself, has less faith in eVac's future: "I think it's dead."

Whether eVac lives or dies, life just isn't all business any more for Laliberté, now in the early joys of fatherhood. For Maxime, his 19-month-old son, and for Nathalie Poudrier, his common-law wife, Laliberté now tries to leave the office each day by 6 p.m. He succeeds about half the time.

Two years ago, Laliberté confessed, self-imposed 20-hour workdays had pushed him "very, very, very close to a burnout." Even today, he claims to consider a 60-hour work week a light one. Still, a change has come. This summer, for instance, the workaholic managed to squeeze in three weekday golf rounds, at 18 holes each, as well as one round on most summer Sundays. His best score? "In the low 90s."

Laliberté is already a long way from the TRS-80, his first computer, a Radio Shack portable he got at age 10 that promised him "the world," furnished him an early life path and put him clearly within reach of becoming a millionaire.

By 14, he was retailing games and some utilities out of his parents' South Shore home – "true shareware," he insisted, not pirated programs. His parents, though, quickly tired of watching total strangers tromp through their home on the way to Laliberté's room; they insisted their only child carry on his retail business in the front vestibule, "with the closet as my warehouse."

Two years later, in 1988, Jitec was incorporated; Laliberté began doing land-office business upgrading 8088 PCs with 286 microprocessors.

Those roots show in the Jitec name, an acronym for Jeu, IBM, Tandy and Et Compatibles. The Jitec approach is to assemble a Vectoria PC only when there's a purchase order or empty retail shelf space to fill. Given that, Laliberté was told, the initial three letters in Jitec could just as easily stand for "just in time."

"You're right," he chuckled.

"I never even thought of that."

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